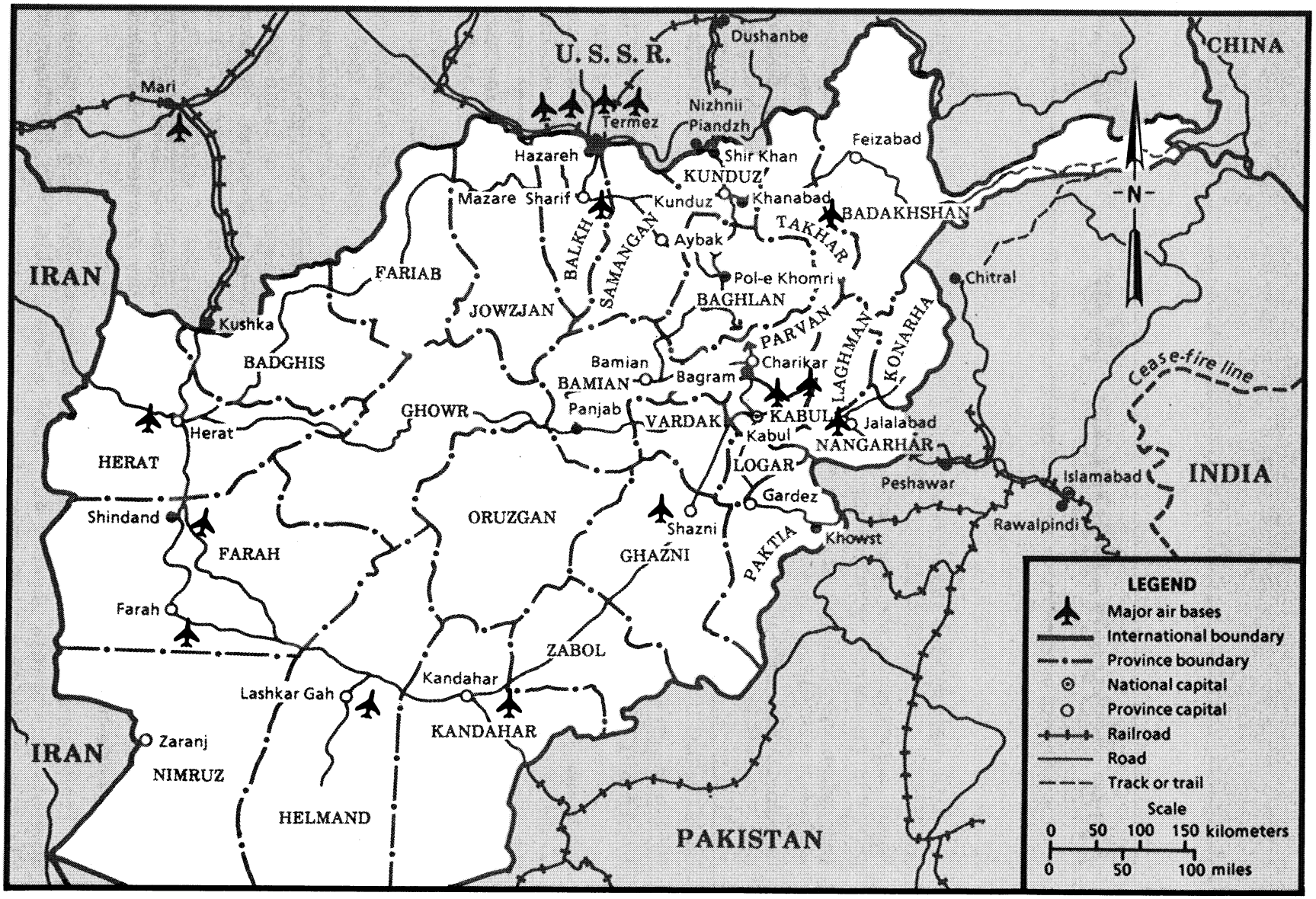
The Soviet-Afghan War

Although Soviet involvement in Afghanistan predates the formal creation of the Soviet Union in 1922, most of the world took little notice of Soviet activities in the area until their lightning military intervention in Kabul in December 1979 (see map 11). From that time until the spring of 1988 when the withdrawal of Soviet military units began, the Soviet Union waged a protracted and difficult war against a determined resistance movement. The war in Afghanistan marked the first time in several decades that Soviet forces had fought an unconventional war—one in which engagements were limited and the enemy did not fight or maneuver as a conventional army but instead relied on guerrilla-style tactics characteristically associated with insurgencies or partisan resistance movements.

An analysis of the war in Afghanistan and the extraction of its lessons pose a considerable problem for historians, mainly because insufficient time has elapsed to provide historical perspective and the available documentary record of the struggle remains fragmentary at best. Throughout the conflict, the Soviet Union made scant information available, and several years elapsed before the Soviet press even acknowledged that their soldiers were routinely involved in combat. Nevertheless, a general glimpse of the Afghan War emerged in Soviet military periodicals, which offered insightful commentary of a theoretical nature. During the course of the war, articles on troop and unit training, though sometimes containing no explicit reference to Afghanistan, reflected a sharply increased emphasis on tactical scenarios typical of mountainous or desert terrain and were obviously intended to educate their readers on the lessons of combat in Afghanistan.[1] Through the use of such analyses, it is possible to identify in broad terms those problems that the Soviet command believed warranted the most urgent attention and thus learn something of the nature of the fighting. By 1984, the Soviet press began to provide glimpses of specific military actions or the exploits of individual soldiers. Progressively more revealing and critical descriptions appeared in print with the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*.

From the perspective of the Afghan resistance, first- and second-hand accounts were always plentiful but varied widely in objectivity. Furthermore, like Soviet accounts, they were often tailored to serve political purposes.



Map 11. Afghanistan

Consequently, when trying to gain a more accurate and integrated picture of the war, descriptions by Western correspondents and independent observers (who entered Afghanistan secretly with the cooperation of the resistance) are often helpful.

The Afghan War in Perspective

Russia's historic interest in Afghanistan dates back to Peter I, but recent Soviet involvement traces its origins to specific circumstances of modern Soviet-Afghan relations. After World War II, the Soviet Union made a concerted effort to win influence in Afghanistan, in competition at times with one or more Western powers. As of 1946, the Afghan regime could be characterized as a limited democracy headed by a monarch but governed under a parliamentary structure.[2] Emerging nationalist and reform movements played a prominent role in establishing the direction of the young state. Lieutenant General Mohammed Daoud Khan assumed the office of prime minister in 1953 and undertook not only to modernize Afghanistan internally but to broaden its international economic ties by making overtures to the Soviet Union. Closer relations by Afghanistan with the COMECON* nations followed, along with the beginnings of Soviet military assistance. In 1956, a landmark year in Afghan-Soviet relations, an accord provided for the reequipping of the Afghan Army by the USSR, a step that necessitated, in turn, the extensive training of the Afghan Army by Soviet specialists. In 1961, Afghanistan began sending large numbers of cadets and officers to the Soviet Union for advanced schooling, and by 1963, Soviet officers were highly visible as military instructors in Afghanistan.

The Soviets also built the country's major highway linking Kabul and other key cities as well as the Salang tunnel on the road to Termez on the Soviet border.[3] In total, counting economic projects, school construction, and other material support, the Soviet Union proffered aid to Afghanistan in excess of a billion dollars in value by the mid-1970s.[4]

In 1973, Daoud staged a successful coup against the Afghan monarchy that resulted in little apparent change in the country's relationship with the USSR. Indeed, a number of his cabinet advisers belonged to or had ties with the pro-Soviet Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Nevertheless, when Daoud visited Moscow in April 1977, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev conveyed dissatisfaction with the measure of Daoud's fealty.[5]

Afghanistan's 1978 "April Revolution," as it was hailed by the Soviets and the PDPA, ushered in a more open and concrete political relationship between the USSR and the proclaimed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Even before his ouster, Daoud had gradually distanced himself from the Parcham faction of the PDPA (based among the more urbane and

*An economic association of Communist countries established in 1949 to facilitate trade and development.

educated elements of the population) and purged several Parcham ministers from his cabinet in 1976.[6] However, a subsequent corresponding rise in the influence of the Khalq faction, which had many well-placed cadres in the Afghan military, probably made Daoud's overthrow more likely. The Soviet Union, India, and various Eastern bloc states promptly recognized the new regime under the PDPA, and a series of hasty political and aid agreements ensued. In December 1978, DRA Prime Minister Nur Mohammed Taraki visited Moscow, signed a friendship pact, and agreed, in a joint communiqué, to pursue long-term cooperation with the USSR.[7]

In the meantime, years of political wrangling in Kabul had estranged the Parcham and Khalq factions both from one another and the population at large. Following the PDPA takeover, Afghanistan plunged into a descending spiral of chaos and recrimination. Taraki tried and failed to do away with his rival, Hafizullah Amin, who in turn seized power in September and saw to Taraki's liquidation in October 1979.[8] Notwithstanding conciliatory gestures toward the Soviet Union, such as an address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in Russian, Amin did not gain the trust of the Soviet government. In a confidential report dated 15 September 1979, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko cautiously advised that Moscow continue to deal with Amin's government but give no support to "repressive actions" against his political rivals.[9] As the political situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, competence may have surpassed trust as the central Soviet concern. Amin perpetuated a policy of rapid modernization along socialist principles, thereby further antagonizing many people who remained devoted to the traditional Muslim mode of life.

In practical terms, the war in Afghanistan had begun by late 1978, over a year before the large-scale insertion of Soviet forces.[10] At that time, high-level Soviet military delegations, headed by General Ivan Pavlovskii, deputy minister of defense and commander in chief of the ground forces, and General Alexei Epishev, a key participant in the intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, arrived from Moscow to evaluate the situation and convey Soviet concerns to Taraki. There was ever more to be concerned about. In March 1979, mobs in Herat broke into open rebellion, and a number of Russians, principally technical advisers, were brutally murdered in the streets. The Soviets responded by rushing in additional military equipment, including Mi-24 helicopters, which had proven their effectiveness against the Eritrean rebels in Ethiopia, and expanded their corps of military advisers to about 3,000.[11] By autumn, the northeastern portion of the country was completely beyond Kabul's control.[12] With the seizure of power by Amin, the Soviets may well have concluded that direct intervention was essential to prevent the collapse of the state apparatus.

The motives for a large-scale Soviet military intervention were the subject of exhaustive comment and speculation. Observers tending toward an "expansionist" view held that Soviet advances in Afghanistan itself were not the ultimate Red objective but were merely initial steps presaging a future Soviet move to capture Iran's petroleum, warm-water ports, and a

strategic position on the Persian Gulf. Subsequent Soviet actions, however, offered little to substantiate such an interpretation. A second or "reactive" view postulated, on the contrary, that the Soviet Union acted preemptively out of defensive concerns over the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and the possible formation of a hostile state on their sensitive Central Asian border. If, however, the Soviets were genuinely worried about the ideological contamination of Central Asia in 1979, they provided scant evidence to that effect in their official press. In fact, official concerns over the negative influence of Islam on Central Asia or incipient nationalist tendencies were far more in evidence eight years later, on the eve of the Soviet withdrawal. A third and more satisfying explanation of the Soviet decision is that Moscow acted to rescue a neighboring client regime on which it had lavished considerable resources and attention.[13] Viewed in light of the Soviet use of force in Czechoslovakia, as justified by the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine (which asserted the right of the collective socialist states of Europe to intervene in the affairs of a single member for the preservation of socialism), Soviet behavior appeared consistent. Especially given the volatile situation in Poland in 1979, a Soviet decision to let events in Afghanistan run their apparent course might have set an unfortunate precedent. Poor intelligence and analysis probably contributed to the Soviets' unreasonable conclusions concerning conditions in Afghanistan and encouraged their decision to intervene.

The Soviet government maintained from the beginning that its "assistance" had been requested by the government of Afghanistan—an assertion that has never been reconciled with the overthrow and execution of Amin, the head of that government. Following the start of the Soviet withdrawal in 1988, a number of Soviet journalists, as well as prominent military and governmental figures, joined in a debate over both the motives of Soviet intervention and the responsibility for the decision. A partial release of diplomatic documents indicates that the Soviets' initial reluctance to insert large combat forces gave way as the position of the DRA deteriorated. Taraki and Amin made at least sixteen formal requests for Soviet troops between 14 April and 17 December 1979. According to an account in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* in 1990, the first indication of a policy shift occurred on 1 August 1979, when three key Soviet officials in Kabul, Ambassador Alexander Puzanov, Lieutenant General (KGB) B. S. Ivanov, and Lieutenant General L. N. Gorelov (chief Soviet military adviser), filed this recommendation: ". . . in view of possible stepped-up activity by the rebel formations in August and September . . . it is essential to respond affirmatively to the request from the Afghan friends and to send a special brigade to Kabul in the immediate future."[14]

Gorelov described his own role differently, however, in a 1989 interview with *Krasnaia zvezda*. Recalling his participation in an August 1979 meeting with KGB Chief Iurii Andropov, Defense Minister Dmitrii Ustinov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, Gorelov allegedly termed it "inexpedient to strengthen our military presence in Afghanistan . . . and even more to send our troops there."[15]

Perhaps as a result of this belief, Gorelov was replaced as the head of Soviet advisers in November.

Details of the final decision to intervene remain obscure. According to a Supreme Soviet review committee report published on 27 December 1989, the decision rested with Brezhnev and a small circle of his closest aides, including Ustinov, Andropov, and Gromyko. The review committee continued to hope that its military, political, and economic efforts in Afghanistan would yield success. During the early stages of the war, the Soviet press repeatedly emphasized that the aim of the USSR was to help the Afghan people preserve their "revolution" against mercenary bandits and their foreign sponsors—notable among them the United States, China, and several Islamic states. By 1987, however, the Soviets emphasized the alleged security imperative of preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for hostile American actions similar to Iran's role under the shah. One Soviet military observer in 1989 even claimed that the northeastern region of Afghanistan was preparing to secede and join with hostile Pakistan.[16] Perhaps, by stressing security objectives as their purpose in Afghanistan, the Soviets hoped to establish a political basis for their claims of at least partial success in the war.

Theater Overview

An oversimplified geography of Afghanistan would roughly divide it into five regions. The eastern fringe of the country is predominantly mountainous, especially in the extreme northeast where the protruding Wakhan corridor joins the Pamirs. Elevations frequently exceed 10,000 feet, and forests often appear at medium elevations. The central mountain region, the Hindu Kush, forms an imposing barrier to travel across the heart of the country. Two major communications links wind through the area. The Salang road, made possible by Soviet construction of the Salang tunnel in the late 1960s, runs north from Kabul to the Soviet frontier. The Shibar road, west of Kabul, was the first route to cross the Hindu Kush upon its establishment in the 1930s. The Turkoman plain, characterized by sandy desert and scattered scrub grasses, dominates the northern edge of Afghanistan. The Herat-Farah lowlands in the west are part of the Iranian plateau and feature some areas suitable for cultivation. Southwestern Afghanistan consists overwhelmingly of sandy desert. The ethnic makeup of Afghanistan is equally diverse. The Pushtuns, with a population of about 6 million, inhabit southeastern and south-central Afghanistan and constituted the dominant ethnic group prior to the war. Along the northern Afghan frontier reside the ethnic cousins of the Soviet Central Asians, the most numerous being the Tajiks, with a population of about 3.5 million. Less numerous are the Uzbeks and Turkomans. Other prominent groups include the Hazara in central Afghanistan and the Baluchis in the west and southwest.[17] Beyond ethnic differentiation, Afghanistan's population of about 15 million is strongly divided along local and clan lines, a fact that has long perpetuated

political disunity. Virtually the entire populace is Muslim, the vast majority are Sunni, although a notable Shiite minority resides in the west.

In assessing Afghanistan as a potential theater of operations, the Soviets might well have drawn conclusions similar to those contained in a 1941 Soviet General Staff study of Iran. Aside from the identification of operational axes, strategic cities and junctions, airfields, and so on, the study reflected a detailed examination of ethnic and social factors and indeed any considerations influencing national strength. Theater analysis of Iran indicated that terrain posed an overriding consideration, constituting "a natural obstacle in nearly all direction[s]" and providing many favorable defensive positions. Movement at higher elevations was difficult, particularly for motorized units and heavy artillery. In addition, the limited availability of vital provisions, such as food, water, and fuel, would necessitate constant logistical support. Moreover, soldiers would have to overcome climatic extremes from the mountains to the deserts. In all, Iran appeared to be a most demanding theater, notwithstanding the apparent weakness of the country's fighting forces.[18]

Elements of Soviet Strategy in Afghanistan

The overriding element in Soviet strategy from December 1979 was the determination to limit the level of its military commitment. With the forces at hand, no plan of conquest and occupation was feasible, and there is no indication that such was ever contemplated. Rather, Soviet strategy was predicated from the beginning upon the resuscitation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's army. The Soviet military mission was to hammer the resistance until Red forces were no longer needed. At first, the Soviets no doubt believed that they faced a limited insurgency in Afghanistan, but they grew to realize that the alienation among the populace was so great that it dwarfed the DRA's capacity and resources to respond effectively. Ironically, the Soviets' arrival may have intensified the struggle by providing a terribly fragmented and inchoate resistance with a common enemy and focus.

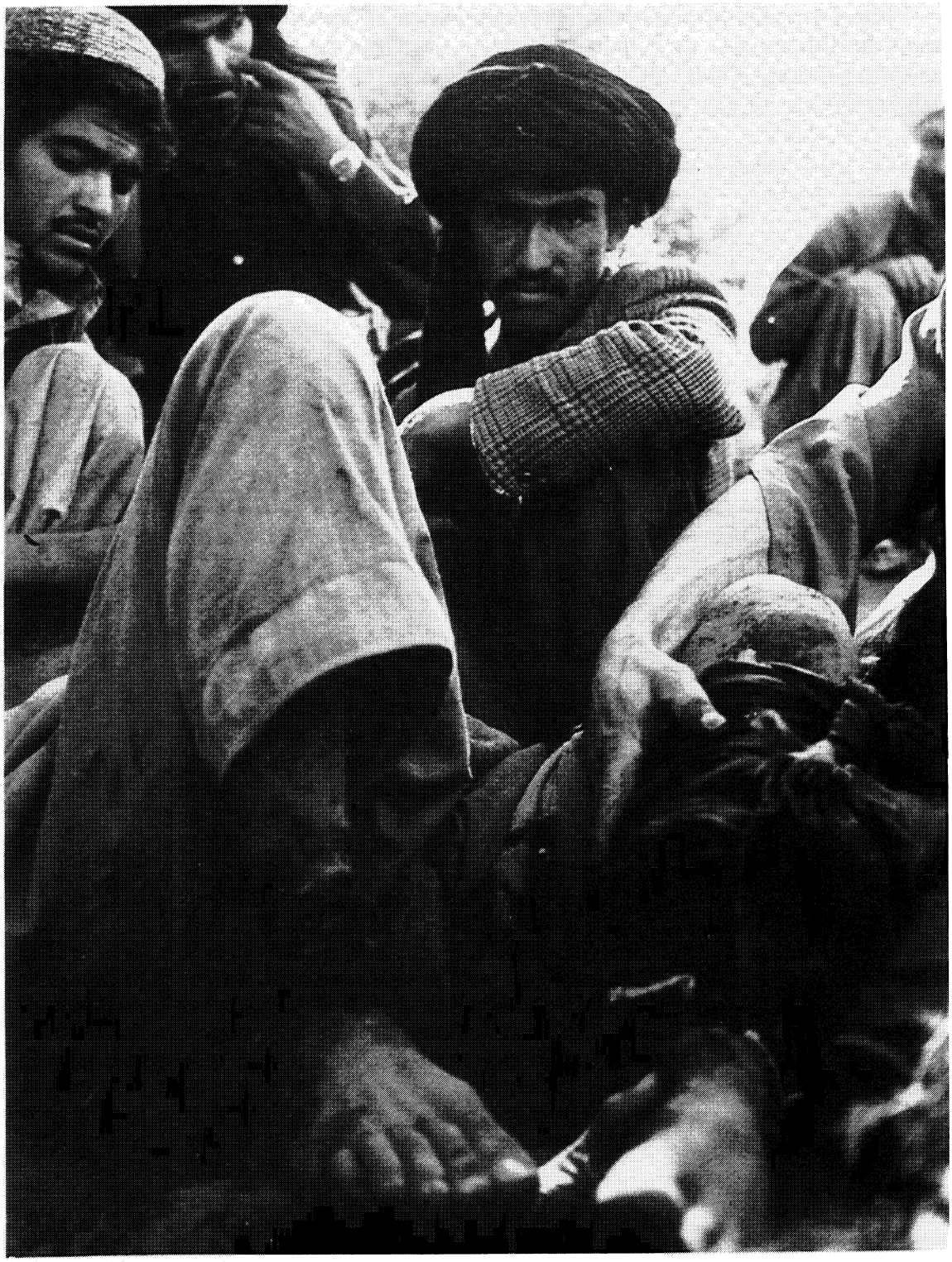
To be sure, no common program emerged among the Mujahideen; nor could it, given historic tribal divisions. The reaction throughout the country could not be described as nationalistic. Rather, it was founded on a historically conditioned, instinctive opposition to foreign intrusions, reinforced by a deep resentment against interference by outsiders in local village and religious affairs. It is noteworthy that a significant component of the population of northern Afghanistan is Uzbek or Tajik, including the descendents of many who fled southward in the wake of the Russian conquest of Central Asia during the nineteenth century and the liquidation of the Basmachis in the twentieth century.[19] As a result, despite the inability of the ten major resistance groups to create a unified military command, or even to put a stop to fratricidal attacks on one another, the DRA could not succeed militarily or politically since it lacked a constit-

uency outside the PDPA and represented only a narrow slice of the urban populace. Soviet military assistance was incapable of filling this void. While the Russians historically had reduced such regions by subjecting them to gigantic envelopments and reductions, in Afghanistan, it was the DRA itself that was besieged. Furthermore, the very Soviet support that sustained the regime, in turn, denied it the credibility necessary for its own self-sufficiency.

Under these circumstances, Soviet strategy necessarily concentrated on five major objectives, only three of which were military. First, the Soviets recognized the imperative to secure Kabul and the highways linking the capital to Kandahar and Herat in the south and, via the Salang Pass, Termez on the border of the USSR. At least 60 percent of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, primarily motor-rifle units, were committed to these tasks.[20] Kabul became a fortified city, wrapped in an elaborate three-layer security belt ten to twenty miles deep entailing a network of bunkers, gun emplacements, and mines. The Soviet Army positioned outposts along all major roads and was especially active in pacifying the northern provinces between Kabul and Termez. Even so, the Kabul regime faced enormous difficulties in ensuring the personal security of its own officials, who were often subject to attacks within the capital itself. The resistance network in Kabul repeatedly carried out shootings, bombings, and assassinations. The newspaper, *Sovetskii sport*, recounted in 1987 the story of an Afghan wrestler who participated in the 1980 Moscow Olympiad despite warnings from the resistance not to do so. After the competition, he was forced to live as a fugitive in Kabul, staying secretly with friends and moving frequently. All the same, he was murdered in 1982.[21]

The Soviets carried the war to the resistance, conducting repeated operations into rebel-controlled areas. Aerial bombing, sometimes massive, typically accompanied such campaigns and contributed to a population exodus on such a scale that Afghanistan scholar Louis Dupree coined the term "migratory genocide" to describe it.[22] By 1986, 5 million Afghans had taken refuge in Pakistan or Iran. By 1987, according to a Western study, approximately 9 percent of the Afghan populace had been killed. Survey data gathered among refugees further indicated that 45.8 percent of all casualties were the result of bombings. Bullets accounted for an additional 33 percent, artillery 12 percent, and mines 3 percent.[23] Like the United States in Vietnam, the Soviets targeted suspected resistance pockets, destroying villages, crops, and anything else that might sustain guerrilla activity. Thus, although the Mujahideen may have exercised control over a majority of the country a majority of the time, their authority was less than enduring. As a practical matter, neither the resistance nor the government could maintain control in much of Afghanistan. By keeping the Mujahideen busy and driving the population that supported them into exile, the Soviets hoped at best to cripple the resistance and at least to hold the military initiative.

Third, the Soviets sought to close the Pakistan frontier to rebel caravans bringing fighters and weapons back into Afghanistan. They had



— *L'Afghanistan: Ou la Lutte Pour Reconquérir la Liberté Perdue*

Far from the nearest doctors and medicine, the freedom fighters tend to their own wounds

no more success in this endeavor than the United States enjoyed in its attempt to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the north in Vietnam. As a result, large amounts of foreign aid helped sustain the resistance. Through 1987, U.S. support alone exceeded $2.5 billion in value.[24]

The two principal nonmilitary elements of Soviet strategy were no less vital to the cause, and it was failure in these areas, above all, that prevented success. First, the Soviets recognized the urgency of rebuilding the infrastructure of the Afghan government and army, both torn by dissension and plummeting morale. Thus, much effort was devoted to educating new cadres, and thousands of young Afghans were dispatched to the USSR for extended periods. The Soviet Army struggled to mold a competent officer corps in the aftermath of a severe hemorrhaging of Afghan Army (the DRA Army) ranks. Only enormous diligence in the effort made possible the modest achievements of eight years.

Second, the Soviets had to acknowledge the unpopularity of their client regime and organize a plan of civic and political action to win adherents. At Soviet insistence, the regime undertook all manner of campaigns to galvanize the public on its behalf, but again, large investments yielded modest returns. The resistance specifically targeted government workers and projects for attack. The DRA claimed, for example, that in 1983 the *dushmany* (outlaws) destroyed 1,812 schools and killed 152 teachers across the country. Furthermore, Soviet-DRA combat operations often compromised political programs by antagonizing the populace.[25]

The Course of Soviet Military Involvement

Contrary to Soviet policy calculations, the injection of Soviet forces into the turmoil of Afghanistan triggered greater uprisings and chaos across the country. Yet the Afghan War began on a deceptively auspicious note for the Soviet Army. In the days immediately preceding Christmas 1979, Soviet units made their way to Kabul by land and air. On 26—27 December, a combined force of about 15,000 men began a series of well-timed maneuvers to paralyze Kabul. Soviet forces locked up the garrison of the Afghan 7th and 14th Divisions, seized the airfield at Bagram, disarmed loyal units of the Ministry of Interior, and stormed Amin's Darulaman Palace.[16] Meanwhile, during the preceding two months, the Soviet Fortieth Army had been organizing in the Turkestan Military District (TMD). Colonel General Iu. V. Tukharinov, former first deputy commander of the TMD and commander of the Fortieth Army, received the operational plans for entering Afghanistan on 12 or 13 December. The plan called for Soviet forces to garrison the major centers along the two major routes, which would serve as lines of communications throughout the war: Termez—Khairaton—Pul-e-khumri—Kabul and Kushka—Herat—Shindand—Kandahar. Because the Friendship Bridge over the Amu River had not yet been constructed at Termez, the first division across employed pontoon bridges. Before deployment, Tukharinov received a change of orders to direct the first division from Termez to Kunduz—not to Kabul. His new mission probably reflected the importance of security on the Salang highway. In any case, other troops were proceeding to Kabul by airlift. River crossings began on 25 December, and by the 27th, airborne troops had secured the Salang Pass, while advanced units pushed on to Kabul.[27] Following the

The Salang Pass

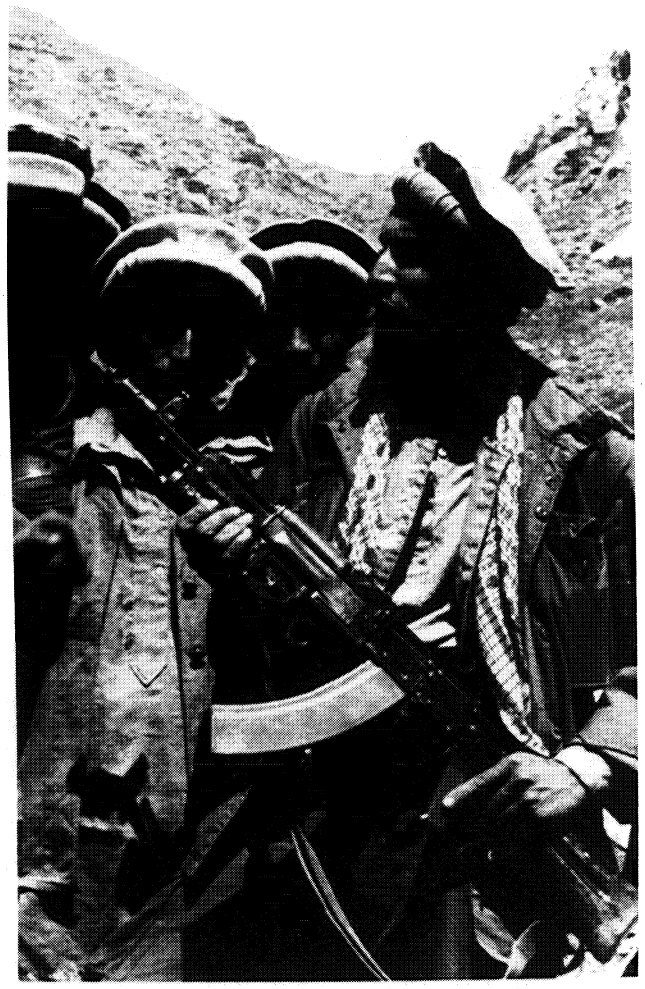
well-executed Kabul takeover in December 1979, the Soviets conducted their first major offensive of the war in the Kunar Valley in February—March 1980, employing a force of approximately 5,000 men with modern armor and generous air support. The guerrillas found themselves virtually powerless to stem the Soviet drive, and large numbers of the shell-shocked populace, 150,000 at the start of the war, abandoned their devastated villages. Helicopters deployed small forces on strategic ridges and the tops of buildings to secure the path of advance but did not block the withdrawal of the Mujahideen. Thus, although the Soviets proved that they could go wherever they wanted, they were unable to hunt down and rout the resistance, which melted away into the mountains and lateral ravines. The offensive achieved little lasting impact. When Soviet forces withdrew, the guerrillas returned. After a 700-mile trek through the mountains in 1981, *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Edward Girardet wrote that he saw few indications of the Soviet presence.[28]

According to a postwar analysis by Soviet historian V. G. Safronov, both sides made early tactical adjustments. The Mujahideen found that large armed groups of 1,000 or more presented lucrative targets for a powerful conventional army and soon operated primarily in partisan detachments of 20 to 200 men. The Soviets, in turn, discovered that "attempts of the command to organize an offensive and pursuit against 'dushman' formations employing large military formations by the rules of classical war were without effect."[29]

L'Afghanistan: Ou la Lutte Pour Reconquérir la Liberté Perdue

Afghan villagers carefully examine an unexploded bomb dropped by the Soviets

Large-scale Soviet operations in 1981 focused on the Panjshir Valley, a guerrilla stronghold only forty miles northeast of Kabul and within easy reach of the vital Salang highway linking Kabul to the USSR. The result was indecisive, and subsequent Soviet attempts in 1982 brought no greater



Rebel commander Ahmad Shah Masoud inspecting a captured Russian AKS-74 with an underbarrel 40-mm BG-15 grenade launcher.

success. The fifth and sixth offensives into the Panjshir Valley in April, May, and August reflected Soviet determination to batter the resistance and cripple the power of rebel commander, Ahmad Shah Masoud (a Tajik), who early proved to be among the most capable resistance organizers. The May campaign, involving roughly 15,000 Soviet and Afghan soldiers and 150 Mi-24 gunships, was the largest of the war to date.[30] Combat in the Panjshir continued for about 6 weeks, during which time, Soviet and DRA forces suffered up to 3,000 casualties. A further 1,000 Afghan regulars were reported to have defected to the resistance. Girardet, a witness to the battle, estimated that the Soviets lost fifty vehicles and thirty-five helicopters in the first ten-day span of heavy fighting. Prior to the drive into the Panjshir, Soviet aircraft bombed suspected rebel positions, including towns and villages, for over a week. Three days before the column arrived, heliborne forces were placed at key points along the valley rim. The guerrillas did not open fire on the Soviet armored column until it had stretched well into the valley, at which time they unleashed fire from mortars and RPG-7 rocket launchers. Curiously, the column was stationary at night, and only after receiving fire in their tents did Soviet soldiers begin digging trenches

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An assembly of Afghans amid their mountainous terrain

for protection. In late June, having inflicted only light damage on the resistance, the Soviets withdrew to the valley entrance.[31]

Soviet forces also carried out a drive into the Paghman area in June and July. Soviet claims of success there were belied by a second offensive into the same area the following autumn. By this time, a persistent pattern, quite congruent with past Russian experience, was already emerging: Soviet command of an area lasted only so long as its forces remained in physical occupation of the ground. As soon as Soviet forces departed, control reverted to the resistance.

In response, the Soviets gradually relied more on battalion-size maneuvers supported by heliborne assault.[32] Girardet likens Soviet tactics in 1982 to American-style search-and-destroy missions in Vietnam, which also did not succeed in eliminating or cowing a less well-equipped foe. Others compare Soviet tactics to a "scorched earth" policy, citing the Soviets' systematic destruction of villages, crops, irrigation systems, and livestock to deny use of the area to guerrillas. Such tactics had proved effective in the Caucasus over a century before, but other, less sanguine, comparisons emerge as well. Soviet columns often extended themselves on the march and became progressively more vulnerable to sudden counter-attacks in narrow defiles and when isolated from friendly forces or supply lines. The Soviets, in many instances, lacked the means to finish their

enemy, which fired on the Soviets from inaccessible points and took full advantage of the extremely rugged and defensible terrain. Equally ominous for the Soviets was the skillful and charismatic leadership of commanders like Masoud, whose repeated successes enhanced his reputation and attracted support from guerrillas in neighboring provinces—a striking occurrence in such a tribally fragmented society.[33]

On a nationwide scale, 1982 saw the Soviets assert their strength in Farah province (April), Gorband Valley (May), Paghman (June—October), and the Logar Valley (June) in order to reopen the highway south of Kabul and the Laghman Valley east of Kabul. In each instance, rebel forces rushed to fill the vacuum left by the Soviets' and government forces' departure.[34] Later in the year, the resistance staged numerous attacks inside Kabul itself. The Soviet Union continued to invest in the political and economic infrastructure of Afghanistan, completing a road and railroad bridge across the Amu River linking the large transshipment complex at Khairaton with the Soviet city of Termez. It also assisted in the organization of the First National Congress of the PDPA, in which delegates from all government-controlled areas participated. In the meantime, however, millions of Afghans had already fled the country, and the resistance showed no signs of abating.

Against the backdrop of United Nations-sponsored talks in Geneva (in which resistance leaders did not participate), the government achieved a six-month truce in the Panjshir Valley with Masoud in 1983. Hardly indicative of a substantive change of position on either side, the accord gave the government an opportunity to focus its attention elsewhere, while Masoud received a much needed breathing spell during which to prepare for battles to come. Combat, again, occurred in a number of provinces but focused for a time on urban centers such as Herat and Kandahar, which suffered enormously destructive bombings. Unfortunately, neither side provided coherent accounts of such urban combat. Meanwhile, the strategic picture remained unchanged, as most of the countryside—80 percent by one estimate—remained outside effective government control.[35]

By 1984, despite vast political efforts, civic works projects, the dispatch of large numbers of Afghans to the Soviet Union for education and indoctrination, relentless government attempts to penetrate and subvert the resistance, and ceaseless military pressure that contributed to a mass exodus of the populace in the countryside (either outside the borders of Afghanistan or into the comparative sanctuary of government-controlled cities), the war gave little evidence of progress. Moreover, members of the Afghan regime were subject to attack, the rate of desertion in the army remained debilitating, and the resistance continued to conduct raids in the vicinity of Kabul—the very heart of DRA power. Busily engaged in protecting Kabul, key provincial centers, and lines of communication, Soviet and DRA forces took the offensive selectively, and small operations by highly trained units received increased emphasis.

The seventh Panjshir campaign of April and May, launched upon the expiration of the year-long truce with Masoud, encountered familiar diffi-

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The villagers near Herat clear away debris after a Soviet aerial attack

culties. From high altitude, Tu-16 Badgers executed some of the heaviest air strikes of the war, while Su-24 Fencers attacked from close range. But the results were indecisive. Meanwhile, Masoud's forces harassed Soviet convoys on both sides of the crucial Salang Pass and once again eluded destruction. Invasion forces did succeed in laying waste to much of the economic base of the valley—crops, livestock, and irrigation canals—and official Kabul radio proclaimed government control of the area. Buoyed by the strength of an entire motorized rifle division with approximately 250 tanks and 150 armored personnel carriers, complemented by helicopter gunships, the Soviets remained in strength until September to attempt one more push. But then, again, they pulled back to the valley entrance. Press reports, citing Western intelligence sources, contend that Soviet forces carried the burden of the fighting, leaving DRA units to occupy captured areas and defend lines of communication. Masoud's force, variably estimated at from 5,000 to 10,000 men, simply retreated into the mountains leaving

the Soviets the extremely difficult choice of further pursuit, indefinitely prolonged occupation of the ground, or eventual withdrawal.[36]

In 1985, the Soviets visibly increased their employment of heliborne and special forces for strikes on remote resistance strongpoints. The most noteworthy actions of the year were a large-scale push into the Kunar Valley to cut rebel lines of communication to Pakistan, which entailed an attempt to rescue a beleaguered government garrison at the isolated outpost of Barikot and a Soviet summer campaign into Paktia. Early in the year, a Soviet armored column failed to break through to the besieged garrison at Barikot, but a second attempt succeeded. Employing air strikes and heliborne assaults on ridgelines, a force of about 10,000 fought its way up the valley in two weeks to relieve the garrison and then pulled back. Meanwhile, the fall of Peshgor, the first capture of a significant government base by the resistance, and the capture of 700 government soldiers in June triggered a Soviet drive to recapture the base using a division-size force. Masoud withdrew from Peshgor before the Soviet-DRA forces arrived. Next, the resistance mounted its largest coordinated attack of the war, employing about 5,000 men against the government garrison at Khowst, but was unable to take it. Guerrillas also engaged in fierce street fighting in Kandahar and seized much of the city, thereby provoking Soviet bombings. In general, the Soviets enjoyed limited success in interdicting resistance supply lines by air, a development that may have reflected the growing effectiveness of the village intelligence network founded by the Afghan security force, the KHAD.[37]

Although the level of combat diminished slightly into 1986, the military trends of the previous year continued. A political event, the replacement of DRA leader Babrak Karmal on 3 May by Dr. Najibullah Admadzi, head of the KHAD, overshadowed developments on the battlefield and signaled a watershed in the Soviet approach to the war. By this time, Karmal had probably become a political liability because of his compromising association with the Soviet-inspired takeover of 1979 and his failure to prosecute the war successfully. In 1989, General V. I. Varennikov justified the change on the ground that Karmal "did not earn the trust of his comrades in arms, the people or advisers."[38] Above all, his removal paved the way for more fruitful pursuit of the National Reconciliation Campaign, by which the regime pledged to open itself to participation by all political factions in Afghanistan.[39]

Still, the new policy in no way signified an end to military pressure, and the fighting was as brutal as during any period of the war. The Soviet Army held the initiative, and the resistance confined its actions to scattered strikes and ambushes. Operations conducted in the first months of 1986 focused on the eastern border provinces of Nangarhar and Paktia for the purpose of curbing the movement of rebel fighters and supplies from Pakistan. In fact, according to a United Nations' report authored by Professor Felix Ermacoul of the University of Vienna, the DRA even considered a scheme to depopulate the eastern border region by resettling 350,000

Babrak Karmal, leader of the Parcham faction of the PDPA and president of the DRA after the Soviet intervention in December 1979

Afghans from the provinces of Kandahar, Laghman, and Paktia to western provinces adjoining Iran.[40] Meanwhile, the caravan trails from Pakistan remained so secure (from the Mujahideen point of view) that *The Washington Post* correspondent William Branigan recorded encountering a number of teahouses along the way, and Fredericke Kempe of *The Wall Street Journal* noted supply garages dug into mountainsides.[41]

Challenged to interdict a well-entrenched supply system operating over unimproved trails snaking across mountains and ravines, the Soviets employed a variety of methods, including air strikes, interception by airborne units, mining of trails, and the establishment of fortified positions at important junctures. They also solicited the cooperation of Pushtun tribes along the frontier, sometimes by the outright purchase of support or by the infiltration of government security personnel. At the same time, the Soviets

were beginning to prepare Afghanistan for their own withdrawal. Particularly symbolic was an offensive during April and May 1986 into Zhawar employing approximately 12,000 to 15,000 DRA soldiers backed up by 1,200 to 2,000 Soviets. The aim was not only to capture a major resistance stronghold but to demonstrate the viability of the Afghan Army (much in the manner that forces of the Republic of Vietnam executed major operations with American assistance late in the Vietnam War). The combined effort resulted in the seizure of a mile-long underground bunker and repair complex near the frontier with Pakistan and featured dawn assaults by heliborne forces. TASS described the encampment as a command center, complete with radios, British-made Javelin missiles, antiaircraft guns, machine tools, an assembly line for producing copies of Enfield 303 rifles (a weapon used extensively by the allies in World War I but possessing greater range than modern, automatic weapons), an automotive repair garage, 18,000 mines, and other assorted stocks. In addition, the Soviets claimed to have killed 2,000 rebels in the action.[42]

In 1987, Soviet and DRA forces executed Operation *Magistral* (Mainline), the largest combined action of the war, to deliver supplies from

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An Afghan child injured by one of the mines planted by the Soviets along the roads and trails of Afghanistan

Gardez and break through to Khowst in Paktia province. Gromov, the Fortieth Army commander, recalled that his most crucial concerns were to secure the Satekundau Pass and preserve operational security. To obtain this result, the Soviets dropped a dummy air assault force directly on the pass to trigger rebel defenses and permit air and artillery fire on heavy weapons positions.[43] Hard fighting, particularly around Khowst and Kandahar, continued into 1987, as the Soviet Union sought to hold the initiative and drive home the point that any prospective withdrawal should not be construed as a defeat. A Soviet journalist, A. Prokhanov, expressed this viewpoint succinctly in a statement for foreign consumption shortly before the start of the Soviet pullout in May 1988: "The departure of our troops is not a defeat. The army is in excellent fighting form. The morale of officers and men is high. It is an organized departure from a country that we did not intend to occupy, did not intend to destroy and subjugate. The troops are leaving as the vector of politics changes into reverse, and the army follows that vector."[44] Such a tortured formulation was not entirely facile—Soviet soldiers were not driven from Afghan soil—but the pronouncement could scarcely conceal a serious policy reversal. (For Soviet losses in Afghanistan, see table 4.) As Soviet forces left, the DRA retained a tenuous grip on political power and groped for a means of accommodation with at least some of Afghanistan's tribal factions.

TABLE 4
Soviet Losses in Afghanistan, 1979—89

Year	*Total Losses*	*Officer Losses*	*Total KIA*	*Officers KIA*
1979	86	10	70	9
1980	1,484	199	1,229	170
1981	1,298	189	1,033	155
1982	1,948	238	1,623	215
1983	1,446	210	1,057	179
1984	2,343	305	2,060	285
1985	1,868	273	1,552	240
1986	1,333	216	1,068	198
1987	1,215	212	1,004	189
1988	759	117	639	106
1989	53	10	46	9

Source: Colonel V. Izgarshev, "Afganskaia bol," *Pravda*, 17 August 1989.

The Nature of Combat in Afghanistan

Writing in 1933 about the conduct of operations in an "undeveloped theatre" such as Central Asia, Red Army analyst G. Pochter observed that the mountains and desert would dictate the lines of communication, the directions of attack, and the lateral maneuver options and extend both the attack columns and rear area. Under such conditions, the role of conventional infantry would be reduced largely to garrison duty. Nature would

always limit the scale of forces, and a division in Central Asia would possess the operational significance of an army in the European theater. Technology, Pochter speculated, might eventually provide an answer to some of these difficulties. Horse cavalry raids supported by air power would offer the optimal combination of mobility and firepower. Chemicals dispersed from the air would block enemy movement or escape through the sealing of passes and ravines. Pochter also forecast a central role for the helicopter, then in its infancy, in a mountainous environment.[45]

Soviet experience in Afghanistan validated much of Pochter's analysis. Terrain and the absence of a well-developed transportation infrastructure in large measure determined the terms of combat. Aside from a single major highway connecting the main cities and the route to the Soviet frontier, there was scarcely any road network. As a result, movement by modern mechanized and motorized forces through the rugged mountains in the northern and central regions of the country proved exceedingly slow and subject to interdiction by small armed bands or mines. Of course, throughout its history, Afghanistan has proved inhospitable to invaders. In particular, the British campaigns of 1842, 1878—79, and 1919 exemplified the enormous risks of trying to sustain conventional forces over great distances. The British were repeatedly unable either to secure their lines of communication or to supply their forces adequately in the field. The Afghans generally chose the time and place of combat and never offered their forces to massed British firepower for general destruction. As a result, British columns were harassed into surrender or extinction.

For most of the latest Afghan War, Soviet troop strength stood between 80,000 and 115,000 men, organized into six military zones, and supplemented by from 30,000 to 50,000 troops based in the Turkestan Military District. DRA units brought the effective combat strength in Afghanistan to about 150,000.[46] According to V. G. Safronov, a Soviet historian, the combined total of all Soviet and DRA forces reached 400,000. This figure doubtless included all forms of official militias, however unreliable. During the initial phase of intervention, Soviet forces included a large number of Central Asian reservists, who were probably chosen by virtue of their proximity to the theater of action and close ethnic ties to the population of Afghanistan. Scattered reports suggest that such units did not perform efficiently and that fraternization with the Afghans led to breakdowns in discipline. However, Safronov maintains that the principal cause of difficulty was the traditional hostility of Afghan Pushtuns to the more northerly tribes.[47] For the remainder of the war, most Soviet units consisted predominantly of Slavs and other European elements of the population of the USSR. One highly decorated Soviet soldier estimated that 70 percent of the troops in Afghanistan were Slavs. Although he expressed no enthusiasm for the performance of Central Asians in general, he did single out the Tajiks as capable fighters. Others reported serious disturbances between Russian and non-Russian, particularly Uzbek, troops.[48]

The bulk of Soviet motor-rifle units engaged in occupation duties and occasional sweeps, in conventional columns, into areas controlled by the

A Mujahideen artilleryman wearing a captured Soviet tanker's headphones and carrying a Soviet antiarmor weapon

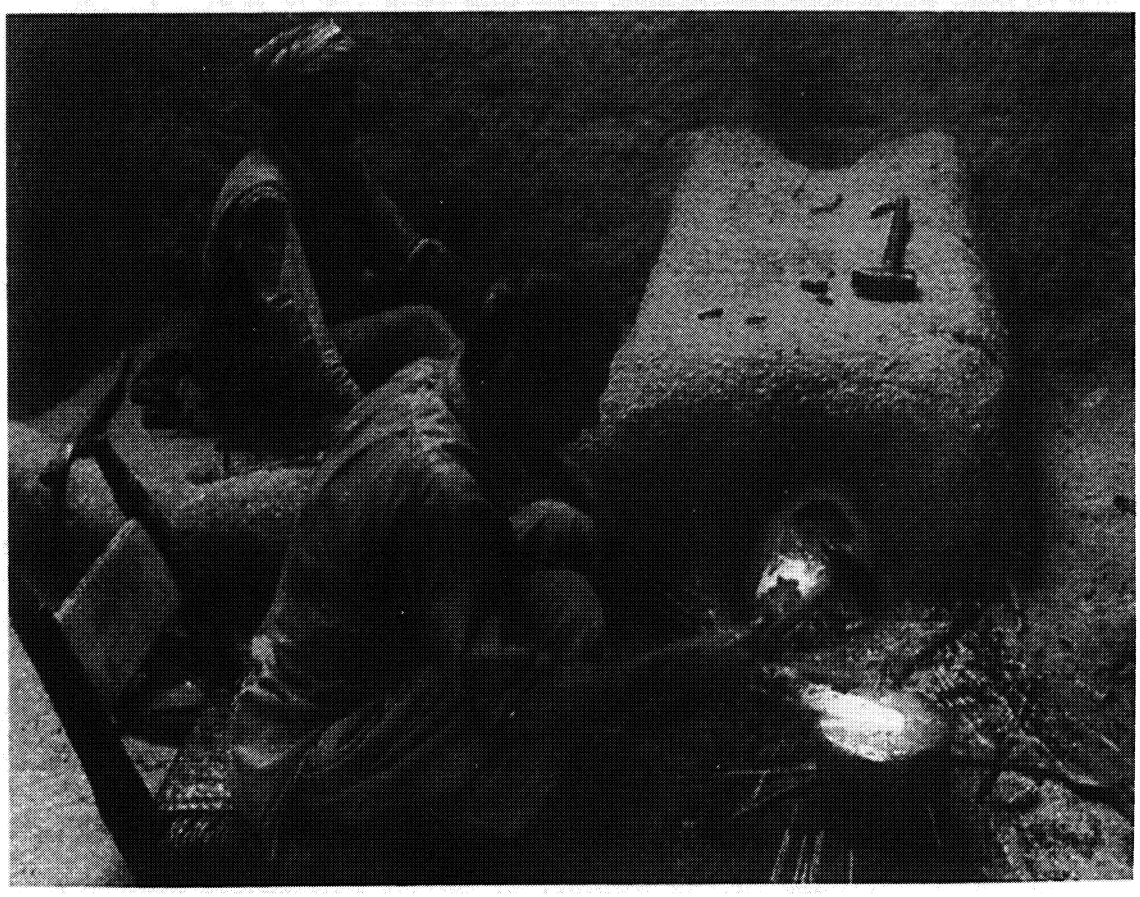
resistance. According to Lieutenant General B. V. Gromov, who concluded the war as commander of the Fortieth Army, 30 to 35 percent of Soviet forces were engaged in security missions. Combat support entering Afghanistan was controlled at division level and above, thereby dulling response time in the smaller unit actions common to the theater. Airborne and assault units, employed most often for reconnaissance or forward security missions, generally proved to be better trained, more responsive to the dynamics of battle, and more capable of independent actions.[49]

Air Power

Soviet air power was perhaps the foremost element in shaping combat dynamics in Afghanistan. The Christmas 1979 shuttle to Kabul involved over 200 An-12 and An-22 transport aircraft, which moved armored vehicles, personnel carriers, and other equipment—as well as approximately 5,000 soldiers.[50] Only when the entrenched strength of the resistance became apparent, however, did the influence of combat aviation fully manifest itself. As the Mujahideen demonstrated their ability to ambush ground columns and exploit advantageous defensive positions, the Soviets realized the increased need for aggressive air support. For several years, Soviet pilots wrought devastation on rebel targets with relatively little regard for Mujahideen antiair capabilities, which consisted almost entirely of small arms and a modest stock of captured Soviet weapons. The gradual

acquisition by the resistance of modern antiaircraft guns, SAM-7s, and later still, sophisticated weaponry such as Stingers and Blowpipes markedly improved the Afghans' odds in ground-to-air combat.

In the context of military development, the Soviets' employment of helicopters in a variety of tactical roles represented a significant step on their part in refining concepts of combined arms warfare. For example, their flexible use of rotor aviation for airlift, especially in rugged terrain that constricted avenues of ground movement and offered few satisfactory landing surfaces for fixed-wing aircraft, proved invaluable. The Soviets primarily used Mi-6 Hook, Mi-8 Hip, and Mi-26 Halo helicopters for the movement of men, supplies, and equipment when terrain dictated. Roads and pipelines remained the principal means of moving bulk items. The government outpost in Khowst, under siege for much of the war, survived only by virtue of aerial resupply. The Soviets engaged Mi-6s extensively in lifting heavy loads—a particularly difficult and risky affair in the thin and heated atmosphere prevailing at mountainous elevations in Afghanistan. The Soviet military press noted, on occasion, the problems of moving heavy loads, especially in the course of landing in or taking off from narrow ravines and canyons, and made them the subject of articles on pilot training. Suspended by a heavy chain or external sling, such loads war-



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A self-sufficient guerrilla blacksmith fashioning pieces of steel for warfare use

ranted careful handling under any circumstances. Both cargoes and helicopters were at times lost because of winds, down drafts, air currents produced by the rotors themselves reflecting off of canyon walls, or the swaying of the aircraft straining to handle a load. One Soviet account describes the adverse effects of reflected air currents on the tail rotor of a helicopter, which forced an aircraft to swerve 180 degrees in the air and caused a loss of load.[51]

Soviet helicopters also played an important role in the escort of ground columns or the forward deployment of small forces to provide security. The placement of units in flanking positions along the intended path of column movements was a standard practice throughout much of the war. Such forces typically assumed sites on high, relatively inaccessible positions to screen the column from resistance units or to pin resistance forces from behind. Once a column was safely past, units might be lifted to a further advance position. Aircraft also laid smokescreens to cover ground forces and proved effective as forward controllers for artillery.[52]

By 1984, Soviet aerial operations clearly reflected tactical precautions against surface-to-air missiles. In a characteristic attack pattern involving six aircraft, a pair of Mi-4s would rake enemy positions with rocket and machine-gun fire, to be followed by fire from four Mi-24 Hinds. This tactic proved particularly deadly to ground forces. In the meantime, the Mi-4s would circle back over the attack area and eject decoy flares. In another observed pattern, two Mi-24s and four Mi-8s would travel in a 1-4-1 formation. In such cases, the late "D" and "E" models of the Mi-24 were armed with four-barrel 12.7-mm guns and 57-mm rockets.[53] Helicopters also assumed large responsibility for airport security. Helicopters escorted all incoming and outgoing aircraft at Kabul airport and regularly released decoys to ensure against possible missile attacks.[54] The Mi-24, by virtue of its ability to carry assault troops, was among the workhorse aircraft of the war. Mi-24 tactics evolved to permit close work in pairs, with one Mi-24 always covering the other during landing or other exposed actions. To decrease their vulnerability, pilots became increasingly skilled at maneuvering behind or close to prominent terrain features, which abounded in the Afghan landscape.[55]

Both the Soviets and Mujahideen constantly refined their tactics in the air-ground war. On 3 August 1982, Soviet Rear Admiral T. Gaidar reported in *Pravda* the capture, during one of the Panjshir campaigns, of a Mujahideen tactical guide for engaging Soviet helicopters. Actually a schematic diagram done in watercolor, the document advised rebel fighters to let the first helicopter of a pair pass through a gorge and to hold fire on the second until it began its turn to make it more difficult for the pilot to establish the source of ground fire.[56] In such situations, the Soviets learned to employ one helicopter far above a target to draw fire, the source of which would be attacked then by a second aircraft waiting nearby. Fixed-wing aircraft frequently employed the same tactic when operating in pairs.[57]

The rapid increase in the number of Soviet helicopters stationed in Afghanistan during the first half of the war was an apt indication of their

growing importance. According to Western estimates, from January to September 1980, the number of Soviet helicopters swelled from 15 to 20 to 250 to 300. By one count, Soviet strength in 1984 included 132 Mi-24s, 105 Mi-8s and Mi-17s, 37 Mi-6s, and a few Mi-2s and Mi-4s. In addition, the Afghan air forces had approximately 150 Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters.[58]

As the Mujahideen acquired improved antiaircraft systems, the combat environment became much more dangerous for Soviet pilots. Early in the war, the Hind "A" and "B" models proved vulnerable to ground machine-gun fire in the main rotor, tail rotor assembly, turbine intakes, and oil tank below the fuselage. The "C", "D", and subsequent models flown by Soviet pilots provided greater protection to the cockpit by means of bullet-proof glass and side shields.[59] Despite their vulnerability, however, Soviet pilots often remained dangerously predictable. One Soviet journalist claims that as late as 1988 in some areas, one could keep time by observing the intervals between helicopter flights.[60]

Conventional antiaircraft weapons obtained by the resistance inflicted losses of perhaps twenty Soviet helicopters per year. Early in the war, the principal guns in the guerrilla arsenal were a Chinese copy of the Soviet ZPU-1, a 14.5-mm machine gun, and the 12.7-mm DSHK machine gun. Such weapons had been used effectively by North Vietnamese gunners against American aircraft. The Swiss-made Oerlikon 20-mm antiair cannon, in use by 1985, proved more effective and offered the advantage of rapid disassembly into portable 55-pound packages. The resistance was also known to employ rocket mortars at low-flying targets. As early as 1983, the Mujahideen acquired significant numbers of SAM-7s that produced immediate results. According to a Western report, the Soviets lost eight Mi-8s in a single operation. Within a short time, they equipped their Mi-24, Mi-8, and Mi-4 aircraft with flare dispensers and added engine shields to camouflage heat exhaust. As a more direct countermeasure, the Soviets often deployed heliborne forces to capture antiaircraft positions.[61]

Fixed-wing aircraft also occupied a vital niche in the Soviet combat scheme in Afghanistan. The MiG-21 was much in evidence early in the war but, according to one observer, did not enjoy great success. Subsequently, the MiG-23 fighter, MiG-27, Su-17, and Su-25 attack aircraft took over the lion's share of the burden. No aircraft had a greater impact than the Su-25 Frogfoot, which operated in a close support role likened by some to that of the American A-10 and was particularly favored for its ability to strike point targets. Able to cruise at subsonic speeds, it was best known to Soviet pilots in Afghanistan as the "*grach*" (rook—a black bird related to the crow). The Su-25 compiled an excellent survival record, but pilots expressed a need for improved countermeasures against SAMs.[62] The Su-25 employed "nap-of-the-earth flight" (close-to-the-ground) tactics and carried cluster bombs with drop chutes to allow dispersal of its ordnance at low altitudes. Masoud himself described the capabilities of the Su-25 as "fantastic."[63]

The Tu-16 bomber, which made its first appearance during the carpet bombing of Herat, conducted numerous high-altitude, heavy strikes, often